Getting the "X" Into Senior Executive Service: Thoughts on Generation X and the Future of the SES

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Introduction

Established by the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978 (and effective 1979), the Senior Executive Service (SES) now approaches its 30th anniversary. As initially envisioned, the SES would evolve to become a cadre of senior Federal-sector leaders and managers with a broad corporate view and an ability to lead and manage from the top of any agency. As described in OPM's *Biography of an Ideal: A History of the Federal Civil Service*, "The reform leaders envisioned it (SES) as a high-prestige, high-reward, and somewhat high-risk service."

Simultaneously, a large percentage of the American demographic cohort known as "Generation X" – those Americans born roughly between 1964 and 1979 – are entering their 30s and early 40s. These "children of the 80s" stand as the chronological heirs to the Baby Boomers in American organizations. There are currently an estimated 325 Gen Xers in the SES (as compared with well over three times as many SESers age 60 and over).

As it nears its 30th year, the SES can and should benefit from some provocative and challenging questions about its future and its next members:

1. How well equipped is a 30 year old "reform," initially created by and designed for two preceding generations, for our next demographic cohort, the Xers?
2. What are the implications of Generation X values and career perspectives on executive leadership and professional development in the SES?

This thought paper aims to spark a conversation. It is, as the label suggests, a paper of thoughts, ideas and concepts designed to spark further discussion and hopefully action.

Background

Generation X is a small demographic cohort. The so-called Baby Boom was, in fact, just that, a population explosion of some 75 million young people (compared with the 52 million or so "Traditionalists" from the generation before). Sometimes referred to as Baby-Busters, Generation X numbers somewhere between just 46 and 50 million Americans. Because of their relatively small numbers, this cohort is often lumped in with or forgotten in the rush to explore and discuss the cohort after them, the 75-80 million Millennials (today's high schoolers and fairly recent college graduates, born approximately 1980-2000).

In today's Federal sector, this small GenX cohort is even further underrepresented – only about 25% of the Federal workforce vs. upwards of 40% by some accounts in the private sector, in large part due to hiring freezes/downsizing in the 90s when a sizable proportion of the cohort would have entered Federal service. Analysts also suggest that Generation X has lower esteem for government because of their steady diet of anti-government political/public discourse, beginning in the early 1980s ("Government isn't the solution to our problems. Government IS

the problem."), heightening the sense that "government is a place where the wheels spin endlessly and great ideas are filed away into a bottomless heap of paper."[1] For visual learners, think back to the scene at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when a large crate containing the precious ark is wheeled through a warehouse for storage, as the camera pans back and shows an ever-more voluminous and sterile facility. And an intriguing anecdotal tidbit: more Xers believe in UFOs than believe they'll ever see a Social Security check.

Generation X is most consistently described as:
- Independent
- Skeptical (even cynical)
- "Disloyal"
- Tech savvy
- Entrepreneurial
- Results oriented
- Untrusting of organizations/institutions

Critical Events for Generation X:
- American Hostages in Iran
- Stock Market Crash of 1987
- Challenger Disaster
- Fall of the Berlin Wall

Cultural Factors:
- Economic Recession
- Rise of the PC Industry
- Divorce & Two-Income Families
- Divorce: 20% in 1960s to over 50% by the 1980s
- Latch-Key Kids

Deeper Issues and Implications

The interplay and effect of these various forces and influences (i.e., cohort effect) has had a profound impact on the values, outlook, and perspectives of a critical mass of Generation X, with potentially significant implications for the SES.

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[1] Nicholas Thompson, "Finding the Civil Service's Hidden Sex Appeal: Why the Brightest Young People Shy Away from Government." Washington Monthly, November 2000.
www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2000/0011.thompson.html

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Job/Career Expectations

Job/career expectations for this cohort were shaped largely by the economic downsizings of the mid 80s and then again in the early 1990s. As a group, Generation X saw the loyal company employees – the "organization men and women" – of their parents and friends' parents generations laid off as the longstanding covenant between employee and employer was shattered across the private sector. This has led not to "disloyalty," as often characterized, but something more accurately described as "just in time" loyalty. Xers do not expect to find lifelong, career employment with one employer. Indeed, today's mid-30somethings have had an average of seven different jobs. An important clarification: surveys clearly show that Xers are not *opposed* to finding a long-term employer, they simply don't *expect* to find one.

Instead, what many observers see emerging are "spiraling career patterns" in which an individual has a general area of professional interest but pursues it across sectors – someone with a background in environmental cleanup might work at EPA for a few years, then leave for a private-sector firm to more quickly payoff loans (average college loan debt for a student today is $20K). After five years of profitable work, our environmental cleanup specialist longs for more of the mission orientation experienced in the public sector, and this time ends up working for an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) for three years. Then, and only if that first government experience was a good one, they might cycle back to government for both the mission and the ability to really impact and effect change.

OPM's recent "Career Patterns" initiative provides a parallel framework for understanding evolving expectations for work. While not sliced demographically, *per se*, the Career Patterns approach with its examination of time in career, mobility, permanence, mission-focus, and flexible arrangements provides complementary data and dimensions with which to understand today's pool of potential employees, including Generation X.[2]

To Consider:

- What is the likely Federal experience base of the next batch of SESers given the development of "spiraling careers? What will this mean for the content of leadership development programs?

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[2] United States Office of Personnel Management, "Career Patterns: A 21st Century Approach to Attracting Talent." June 2006.

- The war for talent will likely be even more pitched for experienced Xers, given the cohort's smaller size – does "high-prestige, high-reward, and high-risk" still describe the SES and is it enough to attract Xers? What role can developmental opportunities play in defining "high-prestige" and "high-reward"?

Hiring/Promotion

"Impatience" is a word often used to described Generation X, particularly in terms of their desire to move up and ahead in organizations. What once could have been explained as a life stage issue (young people tend to be more impatient regardless of generation) seems to have more legs than that. In fact, some of the "impatience" perceptions are likely fueled by a heavy dose of pragmatism and a focus on competence in this cohort. Namely: "If I have the education, have a measure of experience, and have demonstrated an ability to get the job done, I should be able to compete for a position at the next level of responsibility." This "impatience" can be heightened by perceptions of slowness, stagnation, and process over content in Federal hiring and promotion.

This is further compounded by what is termed the "gray ceiling" – promising Xers in their 30s and early 40s find themselves stuck, unable to move up because the pathways to advancement are blocked by Baby Boomers postponing retirement. Much has been made of the impending "retirement tsunami," particularly in the senior leadership ranks in the Federal sector, where some 70% are eligible or soon eligible to retire. However, "eligibility" to retire does not mean "able" to retire.

As a group, Baby Boomers are financially unprepared for retirement (note: last year was the first time since the Great Depression that the US had a negative savings rate). And as American society reaps the benefits of the amazing "longevity revolution," retirement is being redefined right before our very eyes: increasingly, more and more Americans will live in retirement for as long as they worked. Meanwhile, fewer and fewer Americans can amass a nest egg large enough to allow them to live at an acceptable standard of living for that long without either a return to work, a longer career before retirement, or part-time work/part-time retirement. According to Merrill Lynch and AARP, nearly 80% of Baby Boomers expect to continue working when they reach retirement age; some 65% envision an entirely new career.[3] Despite generous Federal retirement benefits, the upper levels of Federal civil service will likely not find themselves immune from such trends.

As a result, already impatient Xers might find the revolving door that much more appealing and an antidote to gray ceiling frustrations. As two Xers commented on the gray ceiling in a recent survey:

- "Only one position opens in 10 years, and so people are around forever: You hear a lot of 'When we tried that in the Carter administration.'"

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[3] Merrill Lynch, "The New Retirement Survey," February 2005. Accessible at http://totalmerrill.com/retirement.

- "There's no career track structure here. Nobody moves up because no one retires, so people are stuck."[4]

Xers also evidence a keen interest in access to decision-makers and transparency in decision-making and this applies to hiring, promotion, and opportunities for professional development. While a different sector, college and university faculty attitudes on the issue of tenure are illustrative. A Harvard study reveals that Xer ("emergent") faculty are deeply skeptical of "closed door" processes and "tend to value transparency as the key to avoiding unfairness or bias. Gen Xers see the process for getting tenure as something like 'archery in the dark' and want the process opened up…they want clarity above all in the tenure process."[5] One can reasonably expect similar attitudes to infiltrate how Federal Xers think about the SES hiring process, access to executive education opportunities, performance reviews, and related pay decisions.

To Consider:

- What, if any, steps can/could be taken to ameliorate the "gray ceiling" in the SES to make room for the next generation of leaders anxious for their opportunity (and willing to leave if it doesn't happen)?
- How can SES processes, such as hiring, performance and access to development opportunities, be made more transparent?

Professional Development

And once in an organization, regardless of sector, Xers have a powerful interest in ongoing learning in development – or as generational analyst Bruce Tulgan calls it, "self building."[6] If loyalty is short term, cutting both ways, and the lifelong employment/gold watch model has been shattered, then the individual is responsible for his/her career progression and – perhaps more importantly – for the ability to find a new job when the time comes for whatever the reason. Furthermore, Xers (and already the Millennials behind them) have demonstrated a greater willingness than previous cohorts to simply leave a job when it is no longer providing what they need financially, developmentally, etc. As a result, ongoing learning and development are of utmost importance to this cohort. Unfortunately, alongside that development imperative is the strong belief that in the Federal sector, when budgets shrink, development is the first thing to go, especially leadership development.[7]   And as noted in a Department of Defense Concept Paper, "there are virtually no corporate-level development programs or continuous learning opportunities for senior executives."[8]

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[4] Amit Bordia and Tony Cheesebrough, "Insights on the Federal Government's Human Capital Crisis: Reflections of Generation X." Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government/Partnership for Public Service, p. 28.

[5] Scott Jaschik, "The Gen X Professor," Inside Higher Ed, April 5, 2006.
http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/04/05/genx

[6] Bruce Tulgan, "Executive Summary: Managing the Generation Mix 2007." Rainmakerthinking, 2006, p. 13.

[7] This is highlighted in the OPM report "Supervisors in the Federal Government: A Wake-Up Call," January 2001.

[8] Department of Defense, "Developing 21st Century Department of Defense Senior Executive Service Leaders," November 20, 2006, p. 15.

To Consider:

- How widespread and available are the continuous learning opportunities for the SES?
- How well are they marketed/advertised as a recruitment tool?
- Should the future SES *require* leadership development rotations with clearly defined paths and expectations for all members?   Similarly, should the concept of sabbaticals, a feature of SES rarely employed, be revived or is it a vestige of another era?
- Should there be better options for developmental assignments of SES to *the private sector, state and local government, foreign governments, international organizations, and NGOs*?   For a globally-oriented cohort accustomed to more movement across sectors (the sector matters, not the geography), this could have significant appeal and would provide powerfully valuable learning experiences for leaders inhabiting a world where network, cross-sector governance is increasingly the norm.
- Xers tend to value mentoring programs (if taken seriously) as a helpful component of career management and professional development. Additionally, public-service leadership has a unique set of circumstances, demands, and stakeholders that can leave leaders from other sectors stunned and overwhelmed.   Should rigorous mentoring programs be an integral part of the SES continuing development process?

Work/Life Balance

Survey after survey, study upon study, reveals a longstanding and consistent emphasis on work/life balance for a large percentage of Generation X. These attitudes will be further tested in coming years as Xers ascend in organizations and face greater demands, opportunities, and responsibilities. For now, however, balance remains a strong workplace value for the cohort. As Professor Charlotte Shelton writes in "The NeXt Revolution," most Xers of both sexes "don't define themselves solely by their jobs. They want work to be only one component of a balanced portfolio of meaningful life experiences that includes family, friends, fitness, and fun…the old ways of doing work aren't working anymore."[9]

In a survey of over 17,000 employees over 9 years, consultant Sharon Jordan-Evans found that when asked to rank 20 job values or attributes in order of importance, all workers under age 41 listed flexibility in their top 10, while most of those in the Boomer generation replaced it with "meaningful work."[10] The Harvard faculty study revealed similar findings: emergent professors across the country believe there is more to life than work, and "This is not a gender or race issue. White men also want to have a balance."[11] To wit, surveys show that Gen X fathers spend an average of one hour a day (a day, not a week) more with their children than their Baby Boomer predecessors did. "Family values," if you will, are experiencing a resurgence in Generation X as well, as part of the balance portfolio. In a 2003 study by the U.S. Census Bureau, GenXers clearly favored a return to family and family values, with family

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[9] Charlotte Shelton and Laura Shelton, *The Next Revolution: What Gen X Women Want At Work And How Their Boomer Bosses Can Help Them Get It.* Davies-Black Publishing, November 2005
[10] Sharon Jordan-Evans, *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em.* Berrett-Koehler Publishers, March 2005.
[11] Jaschik, "The Gen X Professor."

seen as the most stable sense of community for respondents (perhaps not surprising given that half of the cohort are children of divorce).[12]

To Consider:

- How compatible with a "balanced life" is the SES? What are the real expectations, examples, models, and signals for work/life balance within the cadre?
- To what extent could SES members take advantage of government's progressive workplace flexibilities, such as telework and part-time work?

Conclusion

Critical and challenging questions and issues surround the future of the SES. The ascension (hopefully) of the nation's next demographic cohort, Generation X, into its ranks is one of those challenges. The Senior Executive Service is nearly 30 years old and its next generation of member themselves are 30 and even 40 years old. Both sides of the equation merit serious consideration, deliberation, and appropriate action.

While directed at even younger members of the workforce, the comment below from futurist and consultant Ken Dychtwald captures the task at hand, not just for the SES and Gen X (younger but not young!), but for the Federal sector as a whole:

"Most employers treat young workers much as their parents had been treated, usually with superficial training, benign neglect, and blind faith. They expect new employees to train diligently, learn the ropes, and wait patiently for opportunity and recognition. That treatment will dampen the spirit, energy, and ambition of today's young worker and inevitably will result in high turn-over or 'churn' among the young."[13]

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[12] U.S. Census Bureau, "Generation X Speaks Out On Civic Engagement and the Decennial Census: An Ethnographic Approach." June 17, 2003.

[13] From Ken Dychtwald et al, *Workforce Crisis: How To Beat the Coming Shortage of Skills and Talent*. Harvard Business School Press, 2006.